

Winter Safety for the Elderly

The AGS Foundation for Health in Aging's Tips for Older Adults

Many areas of the United States are experiencing record high temperatures this winter. A few areas of the country, such as Colorado and the Great Plains, have been hit by major snowstorms. These storms should remind us all that, despite the unseasonably warm weather, Old Man Winter is never very far from being around the corner, with his blasts of icy cold air and snow.

The cold and ice and snow can cause grave problems for elderly people. Although anyone who is unprepared can be badly affected, older people are particularly at risk for hypothermia, frostbite, injury from shoveling snow, falls, fires and carbon monoxide poisoning, and accidents while driving.

Recently, the AGS Foundation for Health in Aging published several tips to aid seniors and those who care for them in avoiding these common, and sometimes deadly, risks.

Hypothermia:

Because older adults have slower metabolisms, they tend to produce less body heat than younger people. As people age, it becomes more difficult for them to tell when the temperature is too low. A deadly drop in body temperature, or hypothermia, could result. Here is how to avoid hypothermia:

- Stay indoors when it's very cold outside, especially if it's also very windy; and keep indoor temperatures at about 65 degrees
- If you have to go outside, don't stay out in the cold or the wind for very long
- Wear two or three thinner layers of loose-fitting clothing. Layers are warmer than a single thick layer.

Always wear a hat, gloves or mittens (mittens are warmer), a coat and boots, a scarf to cover your mouth and nose and protect your lungs from very cold air.

- Stay dry; wet clothing chills your body quickly
- Go indoors if you start shivering -- it's a warning sign that you're losing body heat.
- Know the warning signs of hypothermia: lots of shivering; cold skin that is pale or ashy; feeling very tired, confused and sleepy; feeling weak; problems walking; slowed breathing or heart rate.

Note: Don't rely on shivering alone as a warning sign, since older people tend to shiver less, or not at all, even as their body temperature drops. Call 911 if you think you or someone else has hypothermia.

Frostbite:

Extreme cold can also cause frostbite: damage to the skin that can go all the way down to the bone. Frostbite usually affects the nose, ears, cheeks, chin, fingers and toes. In very

bad cases, it can result in loss of limbs. People with heart disease and other circulation problems are more likely to get frostbite. To protect against frostbite:

- Cover up all parts of your body when you go outside
- If your skin turns red or dark or starts hurting, go inside right away
- Know the telltale signs of frostbite: skin that's white or ashy (for people with darker skin) or grayish-yellow; skin that feels hard or waxy; numbness. If you think you or someone else has frostbite, call for medical help immediately.

Injury while shoveling snow:

When it's cold outside, your heart works extra hard to keep you warm. Working hard by shoveling snow, for example, may put too much strain on your heart, especially if you have heart disease. Ask your doctor whether it is safe for you to shovel snow or do other hard work in the cold. Also, to avoid falls, be careful shoveling snow or, better, get someone else to do it for you.

Falls:

To lower the odds of a fall:

- Do not walk on icy or snowy sidewalks; look for sidewalks that are dry and have been cleared.
- Wear boots with non-skid soles so you do not slip when you walk
- If you use a cane, replace the rubber tip before it is worn smooth. You might also buy an ice pick-like attachment that fits onto the end of the cane to help keep you from slipping when you walk with the cane. (Find these at medical supply stores)

Fires and carbon monoxide poisoning:

Burning a carbon-based fuel - such as wood, kerosene, natural gas, coal, and propane - releases carbon monoxide. This is a gas that cannot be seen or smelled, and it can kill if fireplaces and stoves are not properly vented and maintained.

- Have fireplace and wood stove chimneys and flues inspected yearly and cleaned when necessary. (Ask your local fire department to recommend an inspector or look in the telephone book under "chimney cleaning")
- Put a smoke detector and battery-operated carbon monoxide detector in areas where you use fireplaces, wood stoves, or kerosene heaters
- Crack a window when using a kerosene stove
- Make sure space heaters are at least 3 feet away from anything that might catch fire, such as curtains, bedding and furniture

Accidents while driving:

Adults 65 and older are involved in more car accidents per mile driven than those in nearly all other age groups.

Since winter driving can be very dangerous, you should:

- Winterize your car before the bad weather hits (have the antifreeze, tires and windshield wipers checked and changed if necessary)
- Check weather reports and check for winter weather advisories before beginning long car trips
- Do not drive on icy roads, overpasses or bridges if possible; look for another route
- If you must drive in snow or ice, use tire chains when possible
- Slow down when roads are covered with snow or ice
- Take a cell phone with you when driving in bad weather and let someone know where you're going and when you expect to arrive so they can call for help if you're late
- Stock your car with basic emergency supplies, such as: a first aid kit, blankets, extra warm clothes, a windshield scraper, rock salt, a bag of sand or cat litter (to pour on ice or snow in case your wheels get stuck in the ice or snow), shovel, booster cables, container of water and canned or dried foods and can opener, flashlight

These and other tips from the AGS Foundation for Health in Aging can be read online at http://www.healthinaging.org/public_education/wintersafety_tips.php